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SUBJECT: CARDINAL ZEN: A SHOT ACROSS THE BOWS TO BEIJING?

REF: A. VATICAN 000543, B. HONG KONG 000755, C. BEIJING 0003624

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CLASSIFIED BY: Fleur Cowan, Political Officer, POL, STATE.

REASON: 1.4 (b), (d)

SUMMARY

¶1. (C) The nomination of Cardinal-elect Joseph Zen Ze-Kiun is a clear signal from the Holy See to Beijing. The nomination highlights several issues: the importance of China and the Catholic Chinese to Pope Benedict; the Vatican's support for Zen's past strong public statements for religious freedom and democracy, and the Holy See's endorsement of Zen's encouragement of ties between the underground and Patriotic Association churches. END SUMMARY.

SUPPORT FOR ZEN'S STATEMENTS ON CHINA

¶2. (C) Holy See Country Director for China Monsignor Gianfranco Rota Graziosi emphasized that the nomination of Cardinal-elect Bishop Joseph Zen Ze-Kiun shows the importance of China to the Pope, and that China must be represented in the College of Cardinals. Rota Graziosi said he hoped the Chinese government would take the nomination with equanimity. He noted, "Critics may disagree with Zen's methods but not the substance of his arguments."

¶3. (C) Rota Graziosi noted that Zen is comfortable with the media, and during his attendance at last year's synod of Bishops in Rome, Zen gave interviews to multiple Vatican-focused news agencies. Rota-Graziosi indicated that the Holy See has now publicly shown that it supports Zen's statements and is sticking to its position on dialogue with China: the end of the Patriotic Association's control over naming bishops and interference in the internal affairs of the Catholic church. (ref A)
Rota-Graziosi does not expect Cardinal-elect Zen to be appointed to a curial position, as Zen has diocesan responsibilities to attend to in Hong Kong.

¶4. (C) [Comment: Per ref B, we note that there is no nuncio in Hong Kong. Rota-Graziosi observed that Eugene Nugent, the Vatican representative in Hong Kong in charge of the See of China, is not in a position to be involved in any Holy See-China negotiations, as he has no diplomatic or official status. "He must be discreet. Neutral -- like rain falling from the sky," Rota-Graziosi emphasized. End comment.]

15. (C) Father Bernardo Cervellera, director of AsiaNews agency, and a China expert, does not believe the nomination of Zen to cardinal will impede dialogue between China and the Holy See. Cervellera affirmed that, "His nomination just makes the policy and the requirements of the Holy See clear: Full freedom of religion, no control [of the Catholic church] by the Patriotic Association, and the Taiwan issue faced after official dialogue begins." Georgio Huang, First Secretary of the Taiwanese Embassy to the Holy See echoed Cervellera's comments saying that the nomination was, "a good idea from everyone's point of view." Huang felt that, "it won't hurt relations with Beijing, as they respect frankness."

16. (C) Cervellera noted his personal hope that Pope Benedict will use Zen as his point person to work with China. As "until now, during the pontificate of John Paul II everyone elected themselves as "an important instrument" for dialogue with China," He noted Holy See officials such as Cardinals Sodano, Celli, Etchegaray, and Sepe who have been involved in shaping the Vatican's China policy. However, he accepted that the Secretariat of State would continue to shape policy on relations

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with China.

ZEN VIEWED AS BRIDGE BETWEEN CHURCHES

17. (C) During the October 2005 Synod of Bishops in Rome, Cardinal-elect Zen spoke publicly about the blurring distinction between the official and underground churches. Zen told the assembled bishops "the Church in China, which appears to be divided in two -- an official one recognized by the government, and an underground one which refuses to be independent from Rome -- is actually a single Church, as everyone wants to stay united with Pope." Shanghai-born Zen has additional credibility at the Holy See due to his time spent on the mainland teaching seminarians. Cervellera feels that Zen strengthened relations between the two branches of the Church and is respected by both.

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COMMENT:

18. (C) The nomination of Cardinal-elect Joseph Zen is another clear signal from the Holy See that China is extremely important to Pope Benedict XVI, but that the issue of diplomatic relations does not trump religious freedom for all Catholic Chinese. This nomination is a shot across the bows to Beijing; despite its desire for diplomatic relations with China, the Holy See has visibly put its support behind Cardinal-elect Zen, his past strong public support for democracy and religious freedom, and the encouragement of ties between the two churches.

19. (C) Some Vatican watchers have reported that Zen may get a curial appointment. Post does not believe this is likely as Zen has extensive diocesan responsibilities, is close to the mandatory retirement age, and it is very rare for a cardinal to be called to Rome for a curial job. If the Pope had intended to transfer him the move should have taken place when Zen was still a "simple" bishop. Our contacts here in Rome doubt that Cardinal Zen's election will stop him from continuing to criticize China's political system, making statements praising the underground church and being involved in the appointment of bishops on the Mainland, despite Chinese Foreign Ministry and Catholic Patriotic Association hopes to the contrary. (ref C) Embassy looks forward to further reporting from Hong Kong and Beijing from their perspective. END COMMENT.
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